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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000419

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: BUHARI SAYS NIGERIA NEEDS DISCIPLINE, WANTS TO VISIT U.S. BEFORE ELECTIONS

Ref: ABUJA 418

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER; REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (U) This message contains a recommendation. See para 5.

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INTRODUCTION  
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¶2. (U) DCM January 31 met with ANPP Presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari and two associates (Bello Abubakar, an aide when Buhari was Head of State previously) and Mouftah Baba-Ahmed (a businessman and brother to both Nafiu Baba-Ahmed (Secretary-General of the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria) and Hakeem Baba-Ahmed (Secretary of the Independent National Electoral Commission-INEC)). DCM February 2 met separately with Buhari campaign coordinator Sule Hamma. Buhari expressed interest in visiting the U.S., while Hamma described how Buhari planned to win.

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OBASANJO LACKS CREDIBILITY, HAS BETRAYED HIS 1999 SUPPORTERS  
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¶3. (C) Buhari, Baba-Ahmed and Abubakar argued Obasanjo had betrayed an electorate that had trusted him to combat corruption and instill discipline. The key to economic efficiency and prosperity was to be found in disciplined leadership by example (from the top), not in expanded privatization. Nigeria's "privatization" program had thus far succeeded merely in handing state-owned enterprises over to Obasanjo's political allies, they said. A Buhari government would focus on rebuilding Nigeria's social and physical infrastructure, they added. Asked whether he would support the bodies charged with combating corruption, such as the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) and the Code of Conduct Bureau and Tribunal, Buhari hedged. He would support all bodies that were "constitutional" but felt that Nigeria had plenty of laws on the books to fight corruption; again, the problem was lack of disciplined leadership at the top and impartial enforcement of existing laws. COMMENT: The constitutionality of the ICPC has survived all challenges to date, but at least one case is still pending. END COMMENT.

¶4. (C) Buhari said he was interested in visiting the U.S. and key European countries during a to-be-determined 10-day period before the elections. DCM repeated the message he had given to Baba-Ahmed earlier; a visit would be welcome but reception at the highest levels was not possible. Buhari understood and said it was essential for Nigeria's most important partners to get to know and "understand" him. DCM concurred, noting that Buhari had a "formidable" reputation from his earlier stint as Head of State. "Yes, but you know me very well," Buhari replied, alluding to an association dating back to 1994.

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RECOMMENDATION  
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¶5. (C) Recommendation: That Buhari be received by A/S Kansteiner should the proposed trip take place. While other candidates may have been received at the DAS level, Buhari is a former Head of State and Obasanjo's only real opposition.

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THE GAME PLAN

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16. (C) Sule Yahaya Hamma was once Sani Abacha's political counselor. Now, he is the coordinator of the Buhari campaign organization. The campaign itself is yet to take off. Its principal had gone on the Hajj and just returned to Nigeria with a cold and without a voice. Notwithstanding this lack of domestic campaign activity by the candidate, Hamma professes to believe that Buhari will win.

17. (C) According to Hamma, Buhari will win by large margins all 19 Northern states except Adamawa (VP Atiku Abubakar's turf) and will get at least 25% of the vote in Adamawa, Ekiti, Ondo, Lagos, Anamabro (VP candidate Chuba Okadigbo's home), one other Southeast state, and four of the six South-South states. Hamma counts on a heavy Northern voter turnout to produce the overall margin for victory. Hamma does not perceive a divide between Northern Muslims and Northern Christians, arguing that adherents of both religions have suffered at the hands of the Obasanjo Administration for their regional identities. He claimed that neither Obasanjo nor Atiku understood the depth of antipathy toward the incumbent government. Hamma expressed concern, however, that opening ballot boxes and tallying votes in "counting and collation centers" would give the ruling PDP the means to rig (by switching ballot boxes).

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COMMENT  
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17. (C) We have not been able to confirm Hamma's allegation that INEC plans to establish "counting and collation centers" but would agree that offsite tallying increases the risk of fraud. Nonetheless, it is an axiom of Nigerian politics that "you only rig where you are strong." Practically, this means that one can inflate vote totals to enhance the margin of the candidate favored in a particular area. One risks unrest, however, by announcing a candidate as the winner of an area whose voters know they overwhelmingly voted for the other contestant. Rigging to strength can have a net percentage effect of near zero nationally if practiced by all. This phenomenon explains why most international observers felt the 1999 presidential election, though marred by fraud on both sides, broadly reflected the will of the Nigerian electorate.

18. (C) Although we cannot rule out a Buhari presidency, it does not seem highly likely. Incumbents have certain inherent advantages that challengers need energy and determination to overcome. In Nigeria, they also need a lot of money. Thus far, Buhari has manifested determination but relatively little energy, and the funds available to him are unknown but judged by most observers as significantly less than the resources Obasanjo and Atiku can marshal. Of course, if Buhari used the margins of the Hajj to raise money, his position might now be somewhat improved, but Obasanjo and Atiku almost certainly can outspend him regardless. Meanwhile, his campaign remains in the starting blocks fully two weeks after the February 13 Obasanjo/Atiku launch.

19. (C) The rationale for a Washington meeting for Buhari has more to do with engaging his support base than with engaging him. Many Buhari supporters are deeply suspicious of the USG. Buhari has been a Mission contact for many years. It is in our interest now to engage with him at a senior Washington level, and to be seen by his supporters as in dialogue with him. History and the nature of Buhari's base suggest that a Buhari presidency probably would not be as favorably inclined toward us as the Obasanjo Administration has been (or would be), but Buhari himself could exercise a moderating influence on his supporters. Even if he loses, his influence will remain substantial. Finally, scheduling conflicts prevented Buhari from meeting Andrew Natsios in Nigeria and hearing the USAID Administrator's message on the importance of non-violent elections. However, the points on the imperative of avoiding violence in the upcoming elections were made by the Ambassador during a separate meeting with Buhari (Septel).  
JETER